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World Chronicle

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CHERNOBYL: TEN YEARS LATER

The Permanent Representatives to the United Nations of the three countries most affected by the Chernobyl accident – Ambassadors Sergey Lavrov of the Russian Federation, Alyaksandr Sychou of the Republic of Belarus and Anatoli Zlenko of Ukraine – discuss the lingering impact of that tragedy on their societies. They appeal for continued international support and humanitarian aid to alleviate the plight of the victims, especially children, who already have very high rates of cancer and suffer from other ailments caused by the greatest accidental release of radioactivity ever recorded. They disagree with the findings of the International Atomic Energy Agency, who published a report indicating that the level of contamination is not as great as it has been reported.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

IAN WILLIAMS: Sitting in for Michael Littlejohns, I'm Ian Williams, and this is a special edition of World Chronicle.

Ten years ago in the former Soviet Union, the nuclear accident at Chernobyl released into the environment the largest volume of radioactive materials ever recorded. The ecological, health and socio-economic consequences still affect millions of people, and have torn apart the social fabric of the countries most directly affected – the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the Republic of Belarus. What lessons are to be learned from this disaster? And what can the international community do to assist its victims?

Our guests today are the permanent representatives to the United Nations of those three countries. They are Ambassador Sergey Lavrov of the Russian Federation, Ambassador Alyaksandr Sychou of the Republic of Belarus, and Ambassador Anatoli Zlenko of Ukraine. Excellencies, welcome to World Chronicle.

We know that 10 years ago this disaster almost led the road to splitting up the former Soviet Union, and the three countries are now almost equally grievously affected. We're asking the international community to help, but how much – are you satisfied with the degree of cooperation between your three counties in trying to mitigate the effects of this disaster?

AMB. LAVROV: Well, if you want me to start, I would of course say that when this tragedy happened – you mentioned that this was considered in the context of the overall developments in the former Soviet Union, and it might have caused grievances about how the country was run at that time. And I agree with you. And the mere fact that the population was kept uninformed entirely of what had happened for quite a long period of time is testimony to that. As to the effects of the disaster and how we feel those effects these days, I believe that Ukraine is the country which has more problems to solve than others, if only because of the fact that the Chernobyl nuclear power plant is on the territory of Ukraine, and I'm sure Ambassador Zlenko will explain his Government's position and the very serious problems they're facing with closing down this plant. On other issues, my basic point is that the humanitarian aid which was coming immediately after the disaster was disclosed to the world public, and which continued to come for quite a considerable time, has been very important to attend to the immediate victims of the tragedy. Unfortunately, the nature of the tragedy was such that assistance, medical and otherwise, to the people who suffered, either by just being there at the wrong time, or by being sent there to liquidate the accident, that assistance to these people requires a much longer time than just immediate the

time spent for humanitarian assistance as we normally perceive it. Many of them still suffer, they still require medical assistance, and this is being done by all three Governments. I certainly know that this is the case for all our three countries, but speaking for the Russian Government I can mention special programmes which we had and which we have renewed only this year. In broader terms, international assistance – I would even call it international cooperation – is required not just to attend to the victims but to try to analyse the causes of the tragedy, try to analyse the conditions under which it became possible, and to draw lessons for the future, be it from the point of view of the nuclear power plant design, be it from the point of view of how you plan nuclear power plants, close to the cities, or in a forest or in a desert – all those infrastructural socio-economic problems, and certainly things like the radiological consequences of this type of accident and what can people do, both to prevent such accidents in the future and to be really much more ready if, God forbid, these accidents happen again in any other country in the world. This is, I believe, an educated – should be an educated interest of all members of the world community, to cooperate on the outcome, on the consequences of the Chernobyl tragedy.

WILLIAMS: Ambassador Zlenko, one of the things which surprises a lot of people is that after the Chernobyl accident – the one reactor exploded, but the other reactors are still in operation, and that this – a lot of your neighbours are very concerned about this and wish that Ukraine would close these down. Do you have any comments on whether this is feasible, or an appropriate reaction?

AMB. ZLENKO: Yes. Thank you for your question. From the very beginning I would like to tell you that what happened 10 years ago in the Chernobyl atomic station concerns the international community. It is in the interests of the international community to find the way to do the best to cope as soon as possible with the terrible consequences of this accident. Of course, the international community is thinking seriously about the shutdown of the atomic station, and we also are prepared to do our best, and a political decision taken by President Kuchma concerning the decommissioning of the Chernobyl atomic station is already taken. We are thinking seriously about compensation. We understand that to close Chernobyl, or to decommission, to make the decommissioning of the Chernobyl atomic station, it will have some consequences in connection with the necessary quantity of energy for our industry. This is a serious problem. In this connection, as to the first issue, dealing with the closing or decommissioning of the nuclear station, we signed a memorandum with the G-7, our President participated in the G-7 meeting which took place last month in Moscow and confirmed our willingness to close the Chernobyl atomic station. And I'm very pleased to inform you that even the G-7 countries also

confirmed their willingness to compensate. And the first sum of a little bit more than $3 billion will be delivered to cope with this project.

But I would like to tell you that Chernobyl is an accident of global dimensions. It is in the interests of all European countries, in the interests of our neighbour countries, in the interests of all communities as well as the United Nations, to find – I would like to underline again and again – to find a way, to find a means to help us to cope with the Chernobyl consequences. This is our tragedy. This is a terrible heritage of the former Soviet Union. But it is in the interests of the world community to find a way to cope with this tragedy.

WILLIAMS: Ambassador Sychou, Belarus doesn't have any nuclear reactors, has no nuclear weapons, and yet was the country that, I think, got most of the radioactive plumey and exhaust from the exploding reactor. Do you have any views on whether nuclear reactors should be allowed near your borders, or – ?

AMB. ZLENKO: You know, it's not a very simple question for us, I mean for Belarus. It's correct, Belarus has no nuclear power station in our territory, but unfortunately, after the disaster at the Chernobyl power station, Belarus was the most affected country. About 70 per cent of the radionuclides fell on our territory, and about 2.5 million people were living or are living in contaminated areas. And this question, I mean the question of safety, the safety of nuclear power plants, is very important for Belarus. That's why we support the idea for the decommission of the nuclear power plant, I mean the Chernobyl plant, but also we pay much attention to the rest of the nuclear power plants, because Belarus is surrounded by nuclear power plants – one in Lithuania, another one in Russia, and two in Ukraine.

WILLIAMS: All of the same model as at Chernobyl?

AMB. ZLENKO: All of the same model. Yes, you are right. But of course for us it's very important, the human dimension of this tragedy, because also almost 10 years have passed since that tragedy, but this is real life. This is the reality of our life. And it's not only history, but now we are living in such conditions. I mean, we are living in contaminated areas, we are living in areas with a big level of radiation. And for us, this is a question of our survival.

WILLIAMS: One of the reports last year from the International Atomic Energy Authority suggested that, in fact, the radiation wasn't as dangerous as the local authorities had behaved and that people had been moved unnecessarily. I can see that already you're shaking your heads at this. But very firmly they said that the administrative decisions and political decisions made had exacerbated it by moving people unnecessarily, that the radioactivity levels weren't in all cases as dangerous as stated, and that people were moved

from some areas where it was unnecessary. Which, of course, is not what most people on the site seem to think. Do you have any comments on that report?

AMB. SYCHOU: These are not serious, it seems to me, comments. I also read in some papers here in the United States about some level of radioactivity which is shown not the same as we have in real status. I would like to tell you that these days we show a special photo exhibition, a documentary exhibition here at the United Nations, and you can see not only the level of radiation which is in the different corners of the territory of Ukraine or the Russian Federation or Belarus, but the same terrible consequences on the children and adults. I would like to tell you that I don't like to minimize, I don't like to maximize, I would like to call your attention only to the facts – quotidian facts which happen in my country, which testify to the terrible medical and social consequences of the Chernobyl accident.

I would like to tell you that we have a lot of children with thyroid problems. We have a lot of children with already the first stage of cancer. We have a lot of children born with already some disability, or with some consequences of Chernobyl, without hand or without leg, or without hair, or with many, many terrible things which are very difficult to see on the photos which were taken at the zone of Chernobyl accident. In this connection I would like to tell you this is not serious, to publish some material, to edit some material which tries to minimize these consequences. We have terrible consequences; we need a lot of money to cope with these consequences; and we try to promote international cooperation. We try to promote cooperation between our three republics – the Russian Federation, Belarus and Ukraine – and we try to launch different initiatives, inviting for the proper international cooperation. This is, it seems to me, our obligation, this is the obligation of the three republics, this is the obligation of the international community, to do their best – I repeat again, to do their best.

WILLIAMS: This is a special edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guests are Ambassador Sergey Lavrov of the Russian Federation, Ambassador Alyaksandr Sychou of Belarus, and Ambassador Anatoli Zlenko of Ukraine.

And all three republics – a troika, if I may say so, with three of you here – have been undergoing social and political change in a big way since this happened. Have these political and economic changes hindered the type of social welfare infrastructure that would be necessary to deal with the victims and to cope? Have you been able to adapt the previous structures in the change of systems?

AMB. LAVROV: Well, I can speak only for my country, of course. And I wouldn't say, though, that social and economic changes – while indeed the reforms which have been long overdo made quite a lot of people suffer, let's be frank about it, and hopefully the worst

part of this transformation is over and the improvement is now visible. But in no stage of our reforms was there any disagreement on the need to continue special programmes to support Chernobyl victims and to support Chernobyl programmes. And only this year, as I said, the Russian Government adopted a special programme.

I would like briefly to support what Ambassador Zlenko said about the recent assessments which you quoted, saying that the radiation levels might have been not as high and not as dangerous as originally perceived. I tend to fully agree with Ambassador Zlenko that this is not serious. And I don't want to be not very polite, speaking in an international setting, but I hope that there is no political agenda behind those "assessments", quote-unquote, to explain why the international community is not very much active on the programmes of cooperation with Chernobyl. I want to be understood rightly: We cannot expect the United Nations, for example, to solve the problem of shutting down the Chernobyl reactor, to which Ambassador Zlenko alluded, and at the meeting of eight countries – actually nine countries – in Moscow, where Ukraine was present, this was discussed. And this is for the biggest donors in the world to address this issue. But the UN still can, and tries to do what it can, and we value very much the efforts of the Economic Commission for Europe, UNESCO, WHO, IAEA, though not formally part of the UN system, WHO, and individual donors like Germany, France, the United States, Finland, Japan, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, who started when they still were a single country, to assist, to participate in Chernobyl programmes. And we value the recent appeal of the Secretary-General to draw attention to these issues and to appoint a new coordinator, Mr. Akashi, Under-Secretary-General, who is head of Department for Humanitarian Affairs, who has been appointed coordinator for Chernobyl programmes. We don't expect this type of mechanism to solve all our problems. We first of all rely on ourselves. As far as the UN is concerned, we believe that there is still – there must be an educated interest of the international community, both from the point of view of assisting victims in a humanitarian way and also on the other hand from the point of view of investing in the future and buying assurance, if you wish, from all of us not to make these accidents happen in the future, and if they do happen, to be really much more ready for them.

WILLIAMS: Ambassador Sychou, I was especially interested because Belarus was paying 20 per cent of its budget a few years ago, for –

AMB. SYCHOU: Indeed. You know that this is a very complicated problem for us. And we spent about 25 per cent of our national budget for minimizing the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. And of course we need some assistance, and of course we need some international help. That's why we are looking to the United Nations, and we see the United Nations as an organ of coordination of international activities. And of course we

would like to see more involvement from other specialized agencies of the United Nations system, also. We understand that we have adopted five resolutions in the General Assembly, and these resolutions are directed for minimizing the problems which were raised after the Chernobyl disaster, but it's not enough for us. You know that, if we take my country, we have received the most part of assistance on the part of non-governmental organizations, and also from bilateral sources. And of course we appreciate very much the assistance from Germany, from Switzerland, from the Netherlands, from Cuba – you know that they provided us medicines, medical equipment, and they invited our children for vacation, for holidays. But in this case we must think about the future cooperation.

WILLIAMS: What sort of aid would you like to see go into Belarus? Technical, financial?

AMB. SYCHOU: You know, there are many opportunities in this regard, and of course we need some humanitarian assistance, and especially for setting up such a kind of medical institution. And our President, when he took part in the conference in Vienna one decade after the Chernobyl disaster, he proposed to create some kind of fund for victims, not only for victims of the Chernobyl disaster, but also for victims of the disasters which might happen.

WILLIAMS: But am I to understand that Belarus, until recently, didn't have an institute of radiological medicine?

AMB. SYCHOU: Yes. There is a national institute, radiological institute in Belarus, but of course we would like to invite international experts to take part in such kind of activities. And for us it's very important to attract the experience and the knowledge of international experts. That's why we proposed to set up such a kind of institution.

WILLIAMS: I sense from all three of you that there's a sort of sense of disappointment that a lot of the aid that was promised in the heat of the disaster hasn't been forthcoming, and, although grateful for what aid has been received for a tragedy that sort of woke the world, the rest of the world seems to have gone back to sleep. Are you happy with the degree of aid and the amount of interest that the rest of the world shows?

AMB. ZLENKO: Let me, Mr. Williams, first of all, reply to your question. You mentioned in your question concerning the changes of the system, etc., etc. I would like to tell you that we are very much disappointed since the Chernobyl accident practically happened at the beginning of our economic reforms. It has also had a negative consequence on our economic reforms, because – Mr. Sychou mentioned about 25 per cent of their national budget spent every year – Ukraine spends 12 per cent of its national budget for the consequences of the Chernobyl accident. This is negative. You can imagine, 12 per cent of a national budget every year, for 10 years. We spent $5 billion already on the minimizing of

the Chernobyl consequences. This is a lot. If we can put this money towards our economic reforms, different projects, of course, the result would be more positive than it is at the present time.

As to the international assistance, of course, at the beginning it was very difficult to find the right direction of this assistance to the different projects. Now we have a little more, we have – at the present time we have more economic assistance or humanitarian assistance to the different projects in Ukraine, but this is also not enough. You mentioned at the beginning about the shutting down of our Chernobyl station. Yes, we need also some technical assistance on the safety of atomic stations, safety of our atomic reactors – this is the first. The second, we initiated creation of the international scientific and technological centre. We need assistance for the creation of this centre. And I would like to develop this idea. Of course, we need more and more concrete assistance.

WILLIAMS: We have roughly one minute each. Would you like to sum up on what you would like the world to offer?

AMB. LAVROV: Basically I've said this already. I would like, as the Russian representative, the international effort to continue. I believe the tenth anniversary commemoration, which took place in the United Nations on 26 April 1996, was a very good reminder, together with the appeal of the Secretary-General. My point is that it is not asking for charity, it is not asking for detraction from somebody's well being; it is suggesting cooperation. Fortunately, or unfortunately, we do have unique material to study this type of accident and the consequences. It's in everybody's interest to make sure that the nuclear energy with which we go into the next century, and without which we cannot possibly provide for the energy needs of humankind, is safe for all of us.

WILLIAMS: And what lessons do you think the world should learn, Ambassador Sychou?

AMB. SYCHOU: Actually, I fully agree with the words of the representative of Russia, but I would like to stress that the Chernobyl tragedy is not an internal affair of our countries, that this is an international problem. And this problem has international dimensions. And for us it's very important to move further in this field. And we believe that present and further international cooperation will be based on common values and will be useful for all mankind. Thank you.

WILLIAMS: Right. Well, I'm afraid we're coming towards the end of this, a special programme 10 years after the Chernobyl disaster. Excellencies, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this special edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guests have been Ambassador Sergey Lavrov of the Russian Federation, Ambassador Alyaksandr Sychou of the Republic of Belarus, and Ambassador Anatoli Zlenko

of Ukraine. I'm Ian Williams. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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